6 The mystery of everything out there

Bigfoot and religion in the 21st century

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Bigfoot lurks at the intersection of folklore, myth, natural history, the paranormal, and popular culture. Like other North American "cryptids" – Mothman, the Lizard Man, the Jersey Devil – Bigfoot intrigues precisely because it disrupts categories of classification. Literary critic Jeffrey Jerome Cohen has written that monsters are "disturbing hybrids whose externally incoherent bodies resist attempts to include them in any systematic structuration" (Cohen 1996, 6). As a challenge to human/animal binaries and accepted scientific taxonomies, Bigfoot has disturbed and also fascinated Americans for more than 70 years. According to recent polls, approximately 16% of people in the United States today say they believe that Bigfoot probably or definitely exists somewhere in North America's forests (Association of Religion Data Archives 2007; "Paranormal America 2017" 2017). Whether they are correct or not, this continuing interest and belief in Bigfoot provides the cultural historian with opportunities to consider Americans' changing attitudes toward the environment, science, and personhood. In this chapter, I will suggest that Bigfoot encounter stories also tell us about religion in the United States, especially the continuing appeal of mystery, enchantment, and monsters in a supposedly scientific, secular era.

Stories of giants, wild men, and hairy monsters have circulated for centuries, but the modern Bigfoot is a byproduct of industrialization's impact on the landscapes of the mid-20th-century American West. In 1958, members of a logging crew in Humboldt County, California, noticed oversized footprints near their worksite; the loggers soon began attributing accidents and mysterious acts of vandalism to a "Big Foot" creature that seemed to resent their intrusion into the forest. Local and then national media picked up on the story, turning Bigfoot into a cultural phenomenon and, for some "hunters," a lifelong obsession. Though Bigfoot was initially imagined as a single, male creature, evidence of male, female, and juvenile Bigfoots began to be reported from Washington State to Florida. Was Bigfoot a hoax, undiscovered ape, remnant prehistoric human, or something else? Scholar Joshua Blu Buhs has shown how Bigfoot tales built on earlier wild men stories – especially Nepal's Yeti and Canada's Sasquatch – while speaking to 20th-century Americans' anxieties about the disappearance of "wild spaces" and

local cultures, the ever-accelerating spread of consumerism, and the triumph of professionalized science (Buhs 2009).

Yet Bigfoot's origin story also reveals how deeply religion is imbedded in the creature's history and enduring appeal. Logger Jerry Crew, a devout Baptist who first discovered the footprints and made a plaster cast of them in 1958, told a local journalist that he believed the creature had been sent by God as a message that humanity had lost its way due to belief in Darwinian evolution. Crew quoted Paul's letter to the Romans: "Professing themselves to be wise, they became fools, and changed the glory of the uncorruptible God into an image made like to corruptible man, and to birds, and four-footed beasts, and creeping things" (Buhs 2009, 78–9). People in Humboldt County spoke in religious terms, saying they were "converted" to belief in Bigfoot after witnessing the tracks (Allen 1958). A few speculated that Bigfoot might be a descendent of giants who had fled the mythical lost continent of Lemuria and settled in subterranean caves within nearby Mount Shasta (Buhs 2009, 76; Ramaswamy 2004, 73–7). Today, spiritual seekers make pilgrimages to Mount Shasta to search for Lemurians, Atlanteans, "Ascended Masters," "Yaktavians," UFOs, and Bigfoot (McLeod 2009, 67; Scoles 2015).

Despite these connections to religious concerns, Buhs and other scholars who have studied the popular phenomenon of Bigfoot have largely neglected its religious dimensions (Morris 2007; Buhs 2009; McLeod 2009; Regal 2011; Loxton and Prothero 2013). One exception is the work of sociologists Christopher Bader, Joseph Baker, and Carson Mencken. In their book *Paranormal America*, based on polling data as well as fieldwork in various subcultures, they divide Americans who are interested in the paranormal into two categories – those seeking "enlightenment" via, for example, astrology, and those seeking "discovery" of unproven beings or forces (Bader, Baker, and Mencken 2017, 13–14). They portray interest in Bigfoot as primarily driven by a desire for "discovery": i.e., single-minded, masculine, contentious, seeking validation and respect, out to prove mainstream scientists wrong. Bader, Baker, and Mencken note tensions between "serious" Bigfoot hunters, such as those in the North American Wood Ape Conservancy, and "fringe" elements who are open to a wide range of occult, New Age, and "woo-woo" topics (Bader, Baker, and Mencken 2017, 170–5; see also Buhs 2009, 196–201).

My research into contemporary Bigfoot accounts does not support these conclusions, however. In the 21st-century, those Americans who meet Bigfoot – and write about it – are as interested in "enlightenment" as they are in "discovery." In fact, in recent Bigfoot encounter narratives, the "serious" and the "woo-woo" are inextricably interwoven. I argue that encounters with Bigfoot are, above all else, spiritual experiences. A glimpse of Bigfoot is a brush with the divine, at once wondrous and monstrous. It transforms people's lives, their worldviews, and their ethics. It answers certain existential questions and poses new ones. Whether terrified or delighted, people

who meet Bigfoot see the world as full of magic and mystery and nature as teeming with signs and portents. Their prosaic daily lives are replaced by thrilling searches for meaning and new sets of dazzling possibilities, often bringing richer personal relationships and a newfound responsibility toward the environment and each other. In short, Bigfoot does not visit you, it awakens you.

I draw these conclusions based on 15 recent books written by Americans who claim to have personally met Bigfoot. These books, all published in the last ten years, are classified as nonfiction. Though deeply informed by popular culture – especially the films *The Legend of Boggy Creek* (1972) and *Harry and the Hendersons* (1987); the television shows *The X-Files* (1993–2002, 2016–2018), *Supernatural* (2005–present), and *Finding Bigfoot* (2011–2018); and Bigfoot lore circulating on the internet – they purport to be firsthand accounts of real events. As such, these books directly speak to why ordinary people continue to believe they have encountered Bigfoot and how that encounter affects their lives. None of these books were written by professional writers or issued by major publishing houses (which seem only interested in explicitly fictional Bigfoot tales); instead, they are self-published or released by small presses with such names as Vegas Pulse Publishing, Glannant Ty Publishing, and Pine Winds Press. As objects, they feature idiosyncratic covers and nonstandard sizes and layouts (very wide or very narrow margins, irregular line spacing, surprisingly large type fonts). As narratives, they contain meandering storylines, lengthy digressions, puzzling non sequiturs, and at-times-exasperating omissions. Publicized and distributed via the internet as inexpensive paperbacks and ebooks, these works have garnered hundreds of comments and ratings on Amazon.com, Goodreads.com, and other websites, attesting to a small but appreciative audience. Together, they reveal 21st-century Americans' continuing belief in Bigfoot as a "real" entity even as fictional – inevitably comedic – Bigfoots proliferate in TV commercials, greeting cards, and internet memes.

Few if any of these authors would likely agree with me that their Bigfoot experience was "religious" – or even "spiritual" – in nature (see Fuller 2001, 4–7). I doubt they would feel comfortable with those terms, either because they view their religious identity as exclusively Christian or because they see nothing "religious" about meeting a flesh-and-blood Bigfoot. Similarly, people who have been visited by aliens usually do not view their experiences as religious, yet scholars have demonstrated the many ways that UFO narratives draw from religious symbols, impulses, and themes (Jung 1978; Bullard 1989; Whitmore 1995; Denzler 2001; Partridge 2004; Tumminia 2007). If we employ a broad definition of religion/spirituality, one that sees it as a process of constructing existential meaning, then believing you have met Bigfoot in the woods, documenting that encounter, and telling your story are undeniably religious acts.

Ultimately, the religious elements of Bigfoot accounts reveal the persistence of the supernatural, monstrous, and unexplainable in the imaginaries

of Americans today. In recent decades, the percentage of Americans who do not identify with an organized religious group has steadily increased – the so-called "Nones" are up to 23% in the Pew Research Center's 2014 poll – but Bigfoot stories show that people's religious impulses are not so much disappearing as they are finding new forms outside the walls of churches, mosques, and synagogues (Smith and Cooperman 2016). As debate about the extent of "secularization" has broken out in the media and academy alike, Bigfoot encounters demonstrate the endurance of American religious innovation and adaptation (see Fessenden 2006; Sullivan 2007; Taylor 2007; Bruce 2011; Modern 2011). At the same time, Bigfoot narratives also give evidence of important religious continuities. Monsters – from Christianity's demons to Judaism's golem, from Chinese Buddhism's hungry ghosts to Islam's jinn – have long played a key role in religious cosmologies, and the legend of Bigfoot conforms to this pattern (see Beal 2002). Furthermore, Bigfoot stories show that Americans continue to link the supernatural with "wilderness," just as so many have done in earlier eras (see Gottlieb 2004; Feldt 2012).

And so, to understand Bigfoot, we need to start in the forest. Unlike UFOs, which come from the skies, or ghosts, which mostly turn up in human settlements, Bigfoot is a creature of the forest. Naturalist David Rains Wallace, who had more than a passing interest in Bigfoot, described in his book *The Klamath Knot* the forest's disconcerting effects: "There are no horizons in the forest. . . . Getting lost in the forest is an archetypical fear: Dante astray in the wood, separated from the illuminations of birth and death, surrounded by the wolves and panthers of the flesh. One walks endlessly and arrives nowhere" (Wallace 1983, 72). Forests retain these qualities today – along with more romanticized associations – even as industrialization and urban sprawl have sharply constrained and transformed natural spaces. Millions of U.S. hikers go to forests each year in search of health, renewal, and transcendence through exposure to what remains of nature's otherness (see Chamberlin 2016). Some engage in "forest bathing," a meditative practice imported from Japan that supposedly reduces "stress, anxiety, depression, and anger" (Haile 2017; Gleiser 2018). Modernity has created a paradoxical yearning for "bewilderment" in its original 17th-century meaning of being overwhelmed by the woods: in particular, those of North America, where early colonists saw the forest as filled with "peoples and creatures to be shunned lest one lose one's cultural bearings and lapse into the savagery Europeans proudly claimed they had left behind long ago" (Merrell 1999, 22).

Like the majority of U.S. hikers, those men and women who write about encountering Bigfoot are largely white and middle class, with sufficient leisure time to go into the woods or the financial resources to own a house or cabin there (Chamberlin 2016, 194–7). Even before meeting Bigfoot, they tend to view forests as enchanted places of escape from harsh modern life. Elizabeth Scott, whose home in western Washington State was visited by

several Bigfoots, writes that an earlier summer in Alaska had made her "sensitized to the structure and flow of nature. Everything has a specific purpose, a unique pattern to its life, and something special to contribute to nature's overall beauty. Having these ingrained beliefs, my thinking has opened to vast mysteries and knowledge of the world that no person can fully understand or fully grasp" (Scott 2010, 68). Seeing Bigfoot was a culmination of Scott's conviction that nature exists outside rational understanding. "Being outdoors to me was always magical," writes another Bigfoot author (Bearden 2015, 20). As federal and state agencies have crisscrossed North America's forests with thousands of miles of new trails since the 1980s, managing and organizing natural spaces, Bigfoot represents nature at its most untamed and otherworldly (Chamberlin 2016, 201–3).

Believing in Bigfoot restores and amplifies nature's capacity to bewilder. An ordinary hike turns into a spiritual adventure as the forest now becomes full of clues and omens. Like Puritans who once studied earthquakes, rainbows, and other natural occurrences for evidence of God's will, modern Bigfoot hunters scrutinize the forest, constantly finding evidence to be photographed, recorded, and puzzled over (Hall 1989). Footprints, tracks, trampled paths, twisted or broken branches, toppled trees, strange odors, falling rocks, litter, knocking sounds, grunts, howls, even silences provide evidence of Bigfoot's proximity. Hiking in Georgia, Keith Bearden came upon a stack of rocks "arranged so I knew it had to have been done by a hand. Some of the rocks were very large and it would have taken considerable strength to put them where they were. My initial thought was WHY would someone do that? What is it for?" Asked by his wife if Bigfoot does that sort of thing, he replied, " 'Well I guess they could.' The more I thought about the things that had happened, the more I began to think maybe they did" (Bearden 2015, 57–8). For those with faith, curiosity, and a willingness to pay attention, forests become marvelous spaces.

Perhaps influenced by *Harry and the Hendersons* and other popular portrayals, most witnesses encounter a gentle Bigfoot (or multiple gentle Bigfoots) needing protection. Many authors gradually enter into a friendship with Bigfoot. They leave offerings of food to the creature and receive gifts – pinecones, bird feathers, flowers – in return (Gibson 2016, 127; George 2017, 58). They perceive intelligence, even wisdom, in Bigfoot's movements and activities. After encountering evidence of Bigfoot while camping in Georgia, Bearden came to reject "the long held perception that they were the monsters I have always heard about. Instead, they are highly intelligent Forest People with a complex social structure" (Bearden 2015, 80). Similarly, Sali Sheppard-Wolford knew immediately that Bigfoots were wise: "The only things I could see were their eyes: enormous round eyes with a slightly greenish cast. *Full of knowledge, those eyes*" (Sheppard-Wolford 2006, 21). Over the course of four years of living in close proximity to Bigfoot in Washington State, Sheppard-Wolford came to see it as an ethical role

model, "much more human than the men who sought to kill him so they could prove he existed" (Sheppard-Wolford 2006, 275).

Like many powerful spiritual experiences, encountering Bigfoot led these authors to rethink their responsibilities and assumptions. "Respect for them, myself and others. What a great lesson that is for mankind!" writes Bearden (Bearden 2015, 210). Jan Klement's friendship with Bigfoot brought on a newfound ecological awareness. He came to believe that "the greatest threat to them and to us would be the destruction of the wilderness areas" (Klement 2013, 93). In fact, since the 1970s, many environmentalists have embraced the creature as an "ambassador for a truly green spirituality," in the words of lepidopterist Robert Michael Pyle: pagan, wild, and weird (Pyle 1995, 155–7). For them, the existence of Bigfoot makes protecting forests an urgent, sacred calling (see Buhs 2009, 234). "As our population keeps growing and more forest disappear to make room for cities Sasquatch may end up being nothing more than a myth to modern science," laments J.P. Riley. "Time is by no means on our side!" (Riley 2015, 20–1).

However, just as aliens come in demonic, *Alien*-esque forms as well as angelic guises, not all Bigfoots are peaceful and kind. Some authors describe meeting a Bigfoot that is a terrifying embodiment of nature at its most uncaring and sinister. In her trilogy *100 Bigfoot Nights*, Christine Parker chronicles how Bigfoot and, later, "dog-man beasts," terrorized her suburban home from a forest across the street. Seemingly punished for her family's initial curiosity about Bigfoot, Parker's life became consumed with surveilling monsters, as she installed numerous video cameras and audio recording devices around her house to track them. Over time, the monsters became increasingly bold, climbing on Parker's roof and eventually entering her house. Desperate, she installed a cross over her son's bed and brought in a priest to bless the house. Convinced that monsters and humans are headed toward an apocalyptic war with each other, Parker exclaimed, "I wonder how many families are suffering. People are suffering, and those things are breeding, and there is no way to stop them" (Parker 2016, 44). Such a malevolent account of Bigfoot resembles legends of demons or evil spirits that inhabit a dwelling or a loved one's body. Its presence produces not ecological responsibility but the opposite: fear of nature's awesome, inhuman power.

The two versions of Bigfoot – one wise, living in harmony with nature; the other savage and violent – are also reminiscent of two dominant, long-standing representations of Native Americans (Berkhofer 1978; Drinnon 1980; Huhndorf 2001). In fact, Bigfoot is linked with Native Americans in white imaginations much as the buffalo once was (Moore 2001). In 1958, some residents of Humboldt County believed that the original footprints had been made by a "mentally deficient Indian boy" ("Wild Indian Gets Credit for Gigantic Footprints" 1958). Researchers interviewed Indians and scoured their folklore for supposed evidence that Bigfoot had been present in North America for millennia, developing a kind of "ancient astronaut"

theory of Bigfoot (Buhs 2009, 79–80; Tumminia 2007, 264–74). The name "Sasquatch," often cited as a First Nations name for Bigfoot, was actually coined by a white writer based on his Anglicization of a Halkomelem word that seems to have meant "giant" (Loxton and Prothero 2013, 34–5).

Today's Bigfoot authors make constant references to Native Americans. Many endorse the theory that Natives had lived peacefully with Bigfoot until the arrival of European colonists, and they believe contemporary Native Americans retain special knowledge of the creature (Klement 2013, 57; Scott 2010, 119–20; Bearden 2015, 68; Gibson 2016, 74; Verge 2017, 136). Sheppard-Wolford's encounters with Bigfoot triggered a series of dreams and visions in which she came to realize she had been a Native American shaman in a previous life. With the help of a Native woman who lived nearby – and an Indian spirit guide called Dream Walker – Sheppard-Wolford miraculously gained "Indian knowledge" of plants and herbs, unlocked her psychic potential, and (in visions) witnessed how aggressive white settlers had driven Bigfoot into hiding (Sheppard-Wolford 2006). Bigfoot helped Sheppard-Wolford not only to "play Indian" but to *become* Indian, living out one of white Americans' most longstanding fantasies (see Deloria 1998). The stereotype of the ecological Indian in spiritual harmony with nature lives on in the guise of Bigfoot (see Jenkins 2004, 154–74). This is perhaps unsurprising; as religion scholar Darryl Caterine has shown, Native Americans figure prominently in the imaginations of ufologists, Spiritualists, ghost hunters, and others inclined to see North America as a literally and metaphorically haunted landscape (Caterine 2011, 75–6).

Just as Sheppard-Wolford believed that her past life as a Native shaman made her destined to re-encounter Bigfoot in this life, many Bigfoot authors come to the conclusion that something special about them drew the creature to their lives. Rather than randomly stumbling on Bigfoot, they were chosen. "I have searched for answers as to why this continues to occur around me and have ruled out completely any level of coincidence," writes A.H. Verge, going on to wonder if his "direct Native American heritage" might be the explanation (Verge 2017, 132). Other writers speculate that Bigfoot might only show itself to people with big hearts and honest intentions. "The Bigfoot seem to be very sensitive creatures that are able to discriminate heartfelt interest from grasping curiosity," writes Julie Scott. "Maybe they sense the intention of the researchers, and hence take other paths that seem safer. Who knows?" (Scott 2010, 95–6). Another writes, "Pure heart and mind is the key . . . and the past year has led me to this mindset" (Bearden 2015, 202). Like God, Bigfoot knows people's innermost thoughts, and it rewards – or punishes, in its malevolent version – those deserving.

In fact, Bigfoot displays an array of godlike powers in these accounts. Bigfoot possesses hyperacute senses, telepathy, and the ability to mimic human voices. It can disappear into shadows, teleport, shapeshift, control the weather, and cause the forest to magically regenerate. Bigfoot is sometimes accompanied by other paranormal entities, including dog-man

creatures, glowing orbs, and ghosts. Numerous authors report that seeing Bigfoot causes them to have intense, sometimes prophetic dreams. Most of all, Bigfoot can cause cameras to malfunction, endlessly thwarting people's attempts to prove its existence once and for all. Nevertheless, Bigfoot authors include in their books copious photographs of what they *can* document, namely trees, animal feces, their house, themselves, their pets, footprints, and handprints. The *100 Bigfoot Nights* trilogy is accompanied by dozens of online audio and video files curious readers can peruse while reading the books. Despite – or perhaps because of – Bigfoot's many supernatural qualities, authors include these photos, along with maps and transcribed diary entries, to provide verisimilitude and evidence of their "scientific" mindset. Yet even the most "serious" of these writers delve into the "woo-woo" at least occasionally. Dave Gibson, for example, who explicitly rejects paranormal Bigfoot theories as lacking evidence, goes on to admit, "I thought Sasquatches didn't exist for me up until a few months ago, so who knows?" Later in the book, he includes photos of a possible UFO he witnessed, prefaced by, "I am NOT saying the following is a Sasquatch. I think it is a strange atmospheric phenomenon following a Sasquatch visit. Coincidence. Probably. Who knows" (Gibson 2016, 76, 141).

Similarly, when authors consider the possible explanations of what Bigfoot exactly is, they are comfortable with uncertainty. Not a single author insists that Bigfoot is simply an undiscovered ape; instead, they embrace its mystery. Toward the end of her account, Julie Scott lists no fewer than ten possibilities of what Bigfoot might be:

1 North American primate
2 Prehistoric ape: Gigantopithecus blacki
3 Prehistoric Neanderthal man: the missing link
4 Forest people, Stick Indians, Sasquatch, Native American "Brothers"
5 Esau, the very hairy brother of Jacob in the Old Testament of the Bible
6 Cain, the firstborn son of Adam and Eve in the Biblical account
7 Giants/Nephilim/Fallen Angels
8 Demonic shape-shifting spirits
9 Multi dimensional beings connected with UFOs
10 A new species.

(Scott 2010, 117)

Tellingly, the majority of these theories are religious in nature, with several drawn from the Bible. Cain, which appears on Scott's list, looms large in Mormon Bigfoot folklore (Bowman 2007). Nephilim, the offspring of the "sons of God" and "daughters of men" mentioned in Genesis chapter 6, is an integral part of contemporary ufology (Flaherty 2010). These biblical and paranormal explanations coexist comfortably with pseudo-scientific ones because Bigfoot is, above all else, enigmatic and ineffable. Insisting on any one theory's veracity would bind and desacralize the creature.

The experience of meeting Bigfoot produces overwhelming emotional and physical effects similar to how people describe encountering God. As religion scholar Timothy Beal has noted, both gods and monsters evoke "a vertigo-like combination of both fear and desire, repulsion and attraction" (Beal 2002, 7). In her trilogy *Sharing the Mountain with Bigfoot*, Jada Roberts and her family encountered malevolent Bigfoots at their cabin in the Appalachian Mountains. Roberts described how it felt to first approach Bigfoot: "My legs started shaking and getting weak. I was out of breath, and I had to slow down. All I could think of was to get out of the woods." Later, when Bigfoot came to their cabin, she "could not move! It was as if I was paralyzed!" (Roberts 2017a, 36, 45). Writers often report being "in a trance" or "mesmerized," invoking 18th-century philosopher Franz Anton Mesmer's concept of "animal magnetism" (Nadis 2005, 87–91; Roberts 2017a, 45; George 2017, 63). People whisper, "like in church" (Sheppard-Wolford 2006, 180). They weep, lose their breath, and feel dizzy or ill. "My heart was pounding out of control, and my mind was racing," writes Parker (2014, 54). Like the God of the Hebrew Bible appearing in the form of a burning bush or a whirlwind, Bigfoot begets crushing feelings of awe and horror.

As these reactions suggest, meeting Bigfoot is seldom a wholly positive experience. Even when Bigfoot is benevolent, there are costs to meeting it: monomania, isolation, social rejection. "I came to the realization that this sasquatch stuff was taking a toll on my life," writes Tom Lyons. "I was falling way behind on my work, neglecting to exercise, and was feeling like more of a hermit by the day. But I seriously couldn't think about anything else" (2018, 74). Like joining a religious sect, interacting with Bigfoot often brings estrangement from friends and family members who are skeptical or jealous. Bearden faced ridicule when he spoke about his Bigfoot experiences because people "simply thought it was a myth like Santa Claus or Leprechauns . . . just something made up. . . . Some of my own family, even, would laugh at the mere mention of bigfoot" (Bearden 2015, 69–70). Klement's wife left him, convinced he was either lying or crazy; Parker's mother refused to visit after Bigfoot started coming around; Sheppard-Wolford's marriage was jeopardized until her husband too saw Bigfoot (Klement 2013, 66; Parker 2016, 74; Sheppard-Wolford 2006).

At the same time, encountering Bigfoot can forge new, more meaningful relationships among those who shared the experience. When Matt Stevens discovered that his Uncle John had also seen Bigfoot, the two established a deeper bond than they had ever had previously (George 2017, 77–80). Roberts dreaded telling her mother-in-law Pearl about Bigfoot, worried that she would reject her, but in the end the truth brought them new levels of intimacy. "The warm feeling that came over me was so overwhelming that I ran to her arms and started to cry," recorded Roberts. "Pearl and I sat there on the sofa for a very long time as I poured my heart out with the feelings that had been bundled up inside for so long" (Roberts 2017b, 89). Numerous authors

describe conducting internet research about Bigfoot and becoming involved in online discussion groups before ultimately publishing their own stories. New faith communities, both online and in face-to-face meetings, are being created that offer Bigfoot believers (sometimes called Bigfoot "knowers," "experiencers," and "survivors") opportunities for fellowship and affirmation. "I have had the privilege of speaking with eyewitnesses and developed a solid friend base of what could be construed as 'survivors,' " writes Verge. "There are more of us than one would think" (Verge 2017, 135).

Ultimately, meeting Bigfoot brings about a new worldview akin to undergoing a religious conversion. Authors report feeling newly connected to nature and the cosmos, to – in the words of Elizabeth Scott – "the mystery of everything out there in the universe and how it is all intertwined with our existence. What I do know is that we are just a minute part of it all" (Scott 2010, 79). Meeting Bigfoot reminded Lyons that "we often neglect to acknowledge something as infinitely complex as the existence of the universe. Just take a moment to think about how mind blowing that really is" (Lyons 2018, 65). Bearden felt a "joy and peace inside of me I had never enjoyed before. It was like a comfort knowing they were there, just watching" (Bearden 2015, 87). Bigfoot effects such emotions, unsettling mundane life and creating something richer and more spiritually satisfying.

For some, this new worldview includes anger at scientists and political leaders who have refused to examine – or deliberately covered up – Bigfoot evidence. "Quite frankly I felt lied to," writes Lyons. "*Your* entire world flips when you come to realize that a 'fairytale' is an actual full-blown reality. You're faced with the revelation that not only were your parents lied to by those in power, but also your grandparents" (Lyons 2018, 64). Echoing arguments made by antievolution creationists since the 1920s, Bigfoot authors contend that mainstream scientists are not "real" scientists at all because they are too biased and closed-minded (see Larson 2006). The true scientists are in the Bigfoot community, who make observations, conduct research, and publish their findings, just not in ways mainstream scientists recognize as valid. In believing this, Bigfoot authors join psychic researchers, UFO enthusiasts, and other unorthodox scientists who mistrust (and mischaracterize) science while appropriating its trappings (see Denzler 2001, 157–8; Loxton and Prothero 2013, 320–4).

However, unlike an earlier generation of Bigfoot chasers who longed to prove scientists wrong by finding irrefutable evidence of the creature, today's "experiencers" worry about what that exposure would bring (see Buhs 2009, 176–8). "I NEVER want them discovered by science," writes Bearden. "The thoughts of people fearing them and possibly going out looking for them armed is made worse by knowing lots of people would now be endangered by some scared and crazed person wanting to kill one" (Bearden 2015, 166). Bearden and other authors are content to leave Bigfoot hidden, like an esoteric text that only the devoted can decipher. "To be honest, for the sake of Sasquatch, I hope a body is never found and that they are left in

peace," writes Gibson. "Besides, to me it is much more fun to know something that 85% of people don't believe exists" (Gibson 2016, 95). Mass acceptance would cheapen and demystify their experiences, endangering Bigfoot and robbing it of its sacred power.

Together, these accounts show how Bigfoot meets the spiritual needs of 21st-century Americans. Belief in Bigfoot does not carry the baggage of organized religion: the creature has no history of institutional sexism or racism, no sexual abuse scandals, no politics. It is antielitist, with no clergy, dogmas, or creeds. It is versatile: it can be an "add-on" spiritual experience, coexisting with traditional religious practices, or it can stand alone. Bigfoot's associations with Native American spirituality make it seem pleasingly multicultural and indigenous even while transcending human differences. Seeking Bigfoot can be a solo or group endeavor, perfect for a highly individualistic culture that nonetheless leaves people yearning for genuine connections. Similarly, Bigfoot lore circulates on the internet but also encourages people to spend more time unplugged and outdoors. And Bigfoot proves that the conventional wisdom is wrong, making it a good fit for our era of #fakenews and suspicion of traditional authority.

These innovations notwithstanding, Bigfoot speaks to an abiding religious concern: the desire not to be alone in the universe. Bigfoot represents the hope that strange, eerie, and awesome forces still exist, that there is more to life than this modern, rationalized existence. Bigfoot makes you feel alive, perceptive, and attuned. It allows you to be a seeker, scientist, pioneer, witness, and proselytizer on your own terms. You only need to go to the forest and open your mind.

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